The Samaritan Woman and Jesus Christ
(Article)

Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again. But whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a fount of water springing up to eternal life.”
John 4:13–14 (BSB)

Introduction:

Only the gospel of John records Jesus Christ meeting a Samaritan woman (1), as He is travelling from Judea to Galilee and passing through Samaria (‘Jesus and the Samaritan,’ a.k.a. ‘The Woman at the Well’). It is here outside the Samaritan town of Sychar, at Jacob’s well, where this meeting takes place. This is a longer intimate dialogue, and the narrative provides some relevant principles of how to do evangelism. (2) While Jesus could have chosen a different route (circumventing Samaria) to reach His destination, He intentionally uses this route, since He has a missional agenda to complete. (3)

As Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman, we should take note of the history behind the setting: at Jacob’s well, near Mount Gerizim (the Old Testament location of Deuteronomic blessings in Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:12) and the proximity to Mount Ebal (the Old Testament location where Moses had commanded an alter to be built (Deuteronomy 27:4-6). (4) While there is a dispute about the background of the Samaritans, there is no dispute of the hostility between them and the Jews. Jewish history traces the Samaritan lineage back to the Fall of the Northern Kingdom (722 BC), allegedly resulting in Jewish and Gentile intermarriage (2 Kings 17:24-41). Ethnic origin and religious differences put a strain on the relationship between Samaritans and Jews, who considered the Samaritans to be idolators: As a result, open hostility between the two was common. (5)

It is in this context, Jesus is unafraid to overcome social behaviours as part of His mission (6) and as we consider the opening passage above - dealing with repentance and salvation - we realize that it is necessary for Jesus to go through Samaria to offer salvation to the people there, as part of God’s divine mission, despite the hatred and the animosity between Jews and Samaritans. (6) This is the focus of the Bible passage under scrutiny here (John 4:1-43), which is broken up into three parts: One, Jesus and the

Samaritan Woman (v.1-30) - Two, Jesus and His disciples (v.31-38) - Three, Jesus and the Samaritans (v.39-43).

Jesus and The Samaritan Woman

When Jesus realized that the Pharisees were aware He was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John (although it was not Jesus who baptized, but His disciples), He left Judea and returned to Galilee. Now He had to pass through Samaria. So He came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Since Jacob's well was there, Jesus, weary from His journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, ***"Give Me a drink."*** (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) "You are a Jew," said the woman. "How can You ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) Jesus answered, ***"If you knew the gift of God and who is asking you for a drink, you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."*** "Sir," the woman replied, "You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where then will You get this living water? Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock?" Jesus said to her, ***"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again. But whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a fount of water springing up to eternal life."*** The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water so that I will not get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus told her, ***"Go, call your husband and come back."*** "I have no husband," the woman replied. Jesus said to her, ***"You are correct to say that you have no husband. In fact, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. You have spoken truthfully."*** "Sir," the woman said, "I see that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews say that the place where one must worship is in Jerusalem." ***"Believe Me, woman,"*** Jesus replied, ***"a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. But a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father is seeking such as these to worship Him. God is Spirit, and His worshipers must worship Him in spirit and in truth."*** The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When He comes, He will explain everything to us." Jesus answered, ***"I who speak to you am He."*** Just then His disciples returned and were surprised that He was speaking with a woman. But no one asked Him, "What do You want from her?" or "Why

are You talking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar, went back into the town, and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?” So they left the town and made their way toward Jesus.
John 4:1–30 (BSB)

Commentary:

In v.1-3 we learn that Jesus is aware of the Pharisees investigating His activity, and so, due to His concern about a polarization of His ministry with that of John the Baptist - that is a concern about an apparent competition between Himself and John (7) - He decides to continue His ministry in Galilee. (8) When we read that “He *had* to pass through Samaria” (v.4) this indicates a God-ordained divine appointment (9), since Jesus could have reached Galilee without going through Samaria. As it is, the route Jesus and His disciples take, passing through Samaria is a three day-walk. (10)

The unnamed woman Jesus is about to meet (v.5-7) is from Sychar, a small village located near Shechem, with Jacob’s well about half a mile from the village - usually women would come as a group to draw water daily at a certain time, either earlier in the day, or later, to avoid the midday heat, yet - in an unusual way - this woman comes alone, at an awkward time (‘the sixth hour’ in v.6) which is about noon. (11) The geographical site, is an actual historical place (“the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph” in v.5) recorded in the Old Testament (Genesis 48:21-22; Genesis 33:18-19; Exodus 13:19; Joshua 24:32). (12)

It is at this point, while His disciples have gone into the town to buy food (v.8) that Jesus, waiting at the side of Jacob’s well, thirsty from His journey, initiates one of the longest conversations He has with any individual in the Gospels. What is startling here is that a Jewish man, let alone a Rabbi usually could not speak with a Samaritan woman (13), since Samaritan women, were viewed to be in a perpetual state of ritual uncleanness. (14)

As Jesus asks the woman for a drink (v.7) the initial hesitancy of the woman (v.9) is understandable, since Jesus breaking social and religious taboos, does not try to avoid becoming ceremonially unclean from a Jewish perspective, but (as ‘God in the Flesh’) actually *sanctifies* whatever He touches. How did the woman know that Jesus is Jewish? Most likely His speech and his clothing, different than that of Samaritans, enabled the woman to recognize Jesus as a Jew. (16)

As the conversation continues (v.10) the “gift of God” Jesus talks about, most likely refers to eternal life, which only Jesus provides (17): when His mentioning of “living water” has an Old Testament background:

> “For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living water, and they have dug their own cisterns— broken cisterns that cannot hold water.
>
> Jeremiah 2:13 (BSB)

Referring to God’s declaration about the sin and faithlessness of His people - here, the metaphor relates to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, as part of God’s grace, reflecting Jesus’ mission of salvation. (18) Other Old Testament references to water symbolism can be found in Numbers 20:8-11 and Isaiah 12:3, and also Jewish Rabbinic thought associated the coming of the Messiah with the provision of water. (19) The “living water” then, can be seen as symbolizing the life-giving Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39). (20)

In v.13-14 Jesus refers to eternal life in God’s presence (Isaiah 55:1-3) as part of God’s eternal covenant with Jews and Gentiles (Isaiah 55:4, 5), since Jesus is about to address the woman’s sins. (21) At this point, the woman is unaware that Jesus is not talking about physical water, but rather is talking about a spiritual reality (v.15).

The seemingly abrupt directive Jesus gives her to call her husband (v.16) is part of Jesus’ goal to prompt the woman to repent. (22) In this way Jesus turns to the woman’s true need, since our God in His omniscience, always turns to a person’s greatest sin. (23)

In v.17-19, Jesus addresses the woman’s marital status. In general, Rabbis only allowed for three legal marriages, even when death was a factor. (24) Since she acknowledges that she does not have a husband, Jesus commends her truthfulness, while the woman is trying to navigate away from this troubling area in her life. (25) Jesus’ simple request is designed to expose her spiritual condition and her need for aforementioned *true* ‘living water’ - as He reveals to her His knowledge that she has had “five husbands” and is not married to the man she is with now (v.18). (26)

As the woman is obviously uncomfortable with the direction the conversation with Jesus is taking, she acknowledges Him as a prophet (v.19) and poses a theological question about the proper place of worship (v.20-24), which opens up the discussion about the coming Messiah (v. 25-26). (27)

The background to the woman’s question about the proper place of worship reveals the ethnic barriers between the Samaritans and Jews. For the Samaritans - only accepting the Pentateuch as canonical - they concluded the proper place of worship was Mt. Gerizim (Genesis 12:6-7) and *not*

Jerusalem. (28) The woman's reference to "our fathers" (v.20) indicates Abraham (Genesis 12:7) and Jacob (Genesis 33:20), her reference to "this mountain" (v.20) goes back to Deuteronomy 11:29; 12:5-14; 27:12; Joshua 8:33. (29) While the Judeans had destroyed the Samaritan temple located at Mt. Gerizim in 120 BC, and the Samaritans had at one time defiled the temple at Jerusalem, this exposes the history of ethnic conflict and animosity. (30)

Jesus does not get involved in any of the details of this debate, but reveals to her (and us) that true worship is a matter of the heart; i.e. a profound truth about God's nature, He desires 'true worship' to be honest with God. (31) The threefold response of Jesus (v.21-24) shows that the physical place of true worship is about to become obsolete (v.21), insists that salvation is from the Jews (i.e. from Jesus) (v.22), and explains the nature of true eternal worship (v.23-24). (32)

In referring to God as "the Father" - as Jesus' common way of talking about God (e.g. John 2:16; 11:41; 12:27-28; 17:1) - He points out that the object of Samaritan worship is unknown to them. (33) Following this in v.23-24, Jesus clarifies that true worship is already present in and through Christ's work, since He is the *true* temple (John 2:19-22) *and* the resurrection and the life (John 11:25) - hereby, "God is Spirit" (v.24) refers to what God is like, namely His character, along with His divine visible attributes - ultimately then, the fulfillment of true worship is found in God's consummated kingdom (Revelation 21:22). (34)

Notably there is a progression in the woman gradually 'coming closer to Jesus' in faith, as He draws her to Himself, since she exclaims her expectation of a 'teaching' Messiah (v.25). This is based on a Samaritan liturgical understanding of the '*Taheb*' (a Samaritan equivalent of the Messiah) who apparently is a Messiah who teaches. (35) This then prompts Jesus to reveal Himself to her as the Christ, the One she is (unaware of it) expecting: "I who speak to you am He," (v.26) which affects her deeply, since she leaves her jar, goes back to town telling the people: "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" (v.29) just as the disciples return. (36)

Jesus and The Disciples (John 4:31-38)

Meanwhile the disciples urged Him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But He told them, ***“I have food to eat that you know nothing about.”*** So the disciples asked one another, “Could someone have brought Him food?” Jesus explained, ***“My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work. Do you not say, ‘There are still four months until the harvest’? I tell you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are ripe for harvest. Already the reaper draws his wages and gathers a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may rejoice together. For in this case the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for; others have done the hard work, and now you have taken up their labor.”***

John 4:31–38 (BSB)

Commentary:

The departure of the woman and the return of the disciples tells us even more about who Jesus is and why He came. The initial confusion of the disciples, as they see Jesus talking with the woman, prior to her departure (v.27) reinforces the socio-ethnical barrier between Jews and Samaritans at the time. Hence, their astonishment is consistent with their cultural expectations, yet their silence shows their respect for Jesus. (37)

Prompted by Jesus’ disciples insisting that He eat something, Jesus uses the situation and circumstances to teach His disciples (“I have food to eat that you know nothing about” in v.32). (38) Jesus quickly clears up the misunderstandings of the disciples, when He says “My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work” (v.34). (39)

Jesus then uses a possible Old Testament allusion (v.36) harking back to Amos 9:13:

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when the plowman will overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes, the sower of seed. The mountains will drip with sweet wine, with which all the hills will flow.

Amos 9:13 (BSB)

This way Jesus points to both sower and reaper working together, applying this to the Samaritans (John 4:39-42) prior to this encounter with Christ. (40) The “harvest” (v.35) refers to the eternal life provided for those Samaritans who believe in Jesus - as such, Jesus sows, initiating the process,

and the disciples will reap, seen in their completed work of evangelism. (41) We see here, that Jesus and His followers arrive at a moment in time when God's eschatological ('end-time') harvest takes place, as part of God's redemptive plan. (42)

Jesus and The Samaritans (John 4:39-43)

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to Him, they asked Him to stay with them, and He stayed two days. And many more believed because of His message. They said to the woman, "We now believe not only because of your words; we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man truly is the Savior of the world." After two days, Jesus left for Galilee.
John 4:39–43 (BSB)

Commentary:

As Jesus reaches out to the Samaritan woman's heart, we see the happy results now, given the Samaritan people coming to Jesus and "many of the Samaritans from that town believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony," (v.39) and the woman's impactful witness is only surpassed by Jesus Himself (v.42). Note, that it is possible that the 'city of Samaria' evangelized by Phillip a little later (Acts 8:4-8) was Sychar, or Shechem nearby. (43) The authority bestowed upon Jesus by the Samaritan witness ("Savior of the world" in v.42) can be seen as an indication of their animosity towards Roman imperial oppression (44) which by no means indicates that Jesus was always welcome by the Samaritans (Luke 9:51-56).

Conclusion:

In sum, we have seen in Jesus's encounter with the Samaritan woman, an astounding example of how our Lord knows the hearts of all people, along with the fact that this is the longest recorded dialogue between Christ and an individual in the New Testament. We see here how Jesus helps others (the Samaritan woman and His disciples) to move from a fixation on literal meaning of His Words to grasp the spiritual meaning. (45)

Also, we learn here about the hostility between two ethnic groups, Jews and Samaritans, primarily a result of the Samaritans accepting only the Pentateuch, which Jesus successfully overcomes by exposing the inadequateness of Samaritan religion, adequately revealing Himself as Messiah. (46)

In addition, the “water” Jesus refers to in John 4:13-14, refers to the Holy Spirit (see also John 7:39) which eliminates human thirst by springing up to eternal life in believers, satisfying the human soul of Christians. (47)

Worship that honors Christ is believing in Him and not worshiping a building or a structure, since Jesus declares both Samaritan worship on Mt. Gerizim and worship in the Jerusalem temple obsolete (John 4:21) - worshiping anyone or anything else than Jesus is idolatry. (48) Along these lines, since “God is Spirit” the Holy Spirit (John 3:5-8; 7:37-39) and Jesus as the Truth (John 1:14, 17; 14:6) provide the new ‘place of worship’ for believers. (49)

Furthermore, considering Jesus’s call to mission, the events and dialogue with the Samaritan woman, give us insight into evangelism, since man-made boundaries are no match for the gospel. (50) Here, Jesus shows us God’s perfect plan, purpose and timing, since Jesus reveals Himself to her as the promised Messiah (not the Samaritan ‘Taheb’) (v.26) only at the moment she is ready to accept His identity (v.25) and able to benefit from this revelation (v.39, 42). (51)

Likewise, among the main things we learn about in this dialogue, is that salvation originates in Judaism (i.e. in Christ) not Samaritan beliefs, with Judaism completed by the coming of Christ, salvation is now available to Jews and Gentile (all who believe in Jesus) and that as Jesus’ disciples, believers bring others to Him (Matthew 28:18-20). (52) The main point is that Jesus Christ, as the Messiah (“the Savior of the world” in v.42) is divinely able to search the hearts of people and reveal the truth of God - thus, true godly worship must be done “in spirit and in truth” (v.24) - believing in Jesus as the Son of God. (53)

What matters is that salvation is available to *anyone* who believes in Jesus Christ, since the grace of God is unlimited and not based on man-made barriers, boundaries and ethnic distinctions (see ‘Parable of Good Samaritan’ in Luke 10:30-37). (54) Jesus as the truthful and final Abrahamic offspring (Galatians 3:16) reveals God’s missionary heart in this encounter with the Samaritan woman, and we learn that no life is so broken that Jesus cannot fix it, since He seeks out and brings back to life those who are formerly spiritually dead - which foreshadows and finds its completion in Jesus’ own death and resurrection (55), as Jesus confronts the religious leaders:

Jesus answered, ***“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again.”***

John 2:19 (BSB)

Appendix
(Jesus and the Samaritan Woman - John 4:1-43 BSB)

John 4:1–43 (BSB)

[1] When Jesus realized that the Pharisees were aware He was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John [2] (although it was not Jesus who baptized, but His disciples), [3] He left Judea and returned to Galilee. [4] Now He had to pass through Samaria. [5] So He came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. [6] Since Jacob's well was there, Jesus, weary from His journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. [7] When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." [8] (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) [9] "You are a Jew," said the woman. "How can You ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) [10] Jesus answered, "If you knew the gift of God and who is asking you for a drink, you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." [11] "Sir," the woman replied, "You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where then will You get this living water? [12] Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock?" [13] Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again. [14] But whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a fount of water springing up to eternal life." [15] The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water so that I will not get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." [16] Jesus told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." [17] "I have no husband," the woman replied. Jesus said to her, "You are correct to say that you have no husband. [18] In fact, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. You have spoken truthfully." [19] "Sir," the woman said, "I see that You are a prophet. [20] Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews say that the place where one must worship is in Jerusalem." [21] "Believe Me, woman," Jesus replied, "a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. [22] You worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. [23] But a time is

coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father is seeking such as these to worship Him. [24] God is Spirit, and His worshipers must worship Him in spirit and in truth.” [25] The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When He comes, He will explain everything to us.” [26] Jesus answered, “I who speak to you am He.” [27] Just then His disciples returned and were surprised that He was speaking with a woman. But no one asked Him, “What do You want from her?” or “Why are You talking with her?” [28] Then the woman left her water jar, went back into the town, and said to the people, [29] “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?” [30] So they left the town and made their way toward Jesus. [31] Meanwhile the disciples urged Him, “Rabbi, eat something.” [32] But He told them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.” [33] So the disciples asked one another, “Could someone have brought Him food?” [34] Jesus explained, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work. [35] Do you not say, ‘There are still four months until the harvest’? I tell you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are ripe for harvest. [36] Already the reaper draws his wages and gathers a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may rejoice together. [37] For in this case the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. [38] I sent you to reap what you have not worked for; others have done the hard work, and now you have taken up their labor.” [39] Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in Jesus because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.” [40] So when the Samaritans came to Him, they asked Him to stay with them, and He stayed two days. [41] And many more believed because of His message. [42] They said to the woman, “We now believe not only because of your words; we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man truly is the Savior of the world.” [43] After two days, Jesus left for Galilee.

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May God bless you and keep you.

Pastor John

Amen.